

**CITY OF BRIDGEPORT
CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
MARCH 15, 2012**

ATTENDANCE: Cathleen Simpson, Chair; George Estrada, Vice Chair; Florisca Carter, Secretary; Ruben Felipe, Harry Weichsel, Charles Valentino, Rev. William Marshall

STAFF: Atty. Mark Anastasi, City Attorney, Atty. Steve Mednick, Atty. Ed Maley

OTHERS: Bridgeport Mayor William Finch; New Haven Mayor John DeStafano, Paul Timpanelli, President and CEO, Bridgeport Regional Business Council; Maria Zambrano, Executive Director, EXCEL Bridgeport
Alex Johnston, former Executive Director, ConnCann

CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Simpson called meeting to order 5:38 p.m. It was announced that next Tuesday's meeting will be at City Hall Chambers.

APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES.

Atty. Mednick announced that there were no minutes for the Commission to review at this time.

FACT FINDING MEETING REGARDING EDUCATION GOVERNANCE:

a. Mayor John DeStefano, City of New Haven

Mayor DeStefano introduced himself to those present. He said that many things that New Haven is currently doing may not translate to Bridgeport, but added that there may be things that Bridgeport is doing that New Haven can adopt.

Mayor DeStefano added that there were things that he did as Mayor were not in the Charter. The biggest factor for the students is not covered in the Charter and that was the parental involvement. It's been a collaborative effort to have the school district produce top students. As the area emerges from the recession, education based jobs are becoming the norm. He went on to list some of the largest employers in the City of New Haven, which includes Yale, Southern Connecticut State University and Yale New Haven Hospital. There has to be a sense of urgency because the District has to prepare its students to be eligible for those jobs.

Urgency, clarity of vision, and sense of community should be top priorities. None of these are mentioned in the charter. Just because someone appoints people to the Board does not equate

power. Appointing a school board does not mean that there is an automatic collaborative between the Board and the Administration. That is something that has to be attained by everyone working together.

School boards should not represent parties, but skill sets. This includes collaborative collective bargaining. Mayor DeStefano then reviewed some changes that happened when New Haven changed their model and how this changed things in the classrooms. There were also changes in the unions. He listed a number of changes that happen with the lowest performing schools and how they were reconstituted. The budget is done collaboratively between the Chief Administrator and the school administration.

Mayor DeStefano then reviewed the composition of the current New Haven School Board and said that it was a wonderful complement of skill sets. The test scores and climate surveys are published by school.

At the end of the day, the structure does not matter. At the end of the day, the Mayor has to stand up and be accountable. There is still a long way to go, but that the District continues to make changes and progress is being recorded.

Rev. Marshall then asked for more details about the state of the District before the new system was put in place. Mayor DeStefano said that the day that he became mayor, the State had ordered the city to spend 10.3 million dollars. After being mayor for 14 years, in 2008, it became apparent to him that the job was not getting done. Mayoral leadership provided the opportunity for change. The accountability comes in the election and if the district doesn't do its job, the graduates of the District are the ones who pay the price.

When asked if there was some kind of gauge, Mayor DeStefano listed several types of measurements and said that the test scores had been rising. While there was a lot of work still to be done, other collaborative members are now on board.

Mr. Valentino asked how many members were on the board. Mayor DeStafano said that there were seven members plus himself. He appoints all the board members. When he was asked if there were accounting managers on the Board, Mayor DeStefano reviewed the skill sets of the various Board members. Construction is handled through a citywide commission. Custodians have been greatly reduced and the City has the right to bring in outside companies.

Mr. Estrada said that he had always admired the construction program in New Haven. Mr. Estrada asked about the integration of services between the City and the District. The Mayor signs every purchasing order for the District and the City. The biggest thing is the contract negotiations. The Mayor needs to attend the School Board meetings.

Mr. Weichsel asked if there was a direct correlation of the money expended and achievement growth. Mayor DeStefano said that there was some correlation, but not as much as one might

think. The highest performing school has students who have strong support at home. Students who have less support need more attention.

Mr. Weichsel asked if there was a structure to bring the families closer to the school system. Mayor DeStefano said that he wanted parents to be actively engaged in the education of the children. He said that there are times when the system is not transparent or easy. New Haven Promise was aimed at engaging parents, but it is still a work in progress. Doing business as a bureaucracy does not always make it easy for everyone.

Mr. Weichsel asked if anyone on the Board was a City employee. Mayor DeStefano said that he does not believe so, but added that he meets with the Superintendent of Schools before appointing someone for a discussion. If the Superintendent has strong feelings, then Mayor DeStefano doesn't push the appointment.

Ms. Simpson asked how he found such impressive Board members. Mayor DeStefano said that people want to be engaged. Every failure is owned by the Mayor, but the big question is what to do about it.

Ms. Carter said that there were a number of nay sayers in Bridgeport who want to leave things they way they are. Ms. Carter asked if Mayor DeStefano would be willing to be involved in a community discussion about this. Mayor DeStefano said that he would like to hear more about that at another time.

Ms. Carter asked about the political composition. Mayor DeStefano said that Bridgeport Board should not do a hybrid. That was the model Hartford used and it has been a struggle for the City. If the mayoral appointment system does not work out, then change it. However, it is the sense of ownership that makes this model work. Mayor DeStefano said it was important not pull punches on this, but to be bold and aggressive. That involves risk.

Mr. Felipe asked about the per student costs and if the shift of the Board affected that. Mayor DeStefano said that for two years, site based budgets were produced. This allowed the staff to have the discussion about ELL, racial and achievement demographics. The health care costs for the City of New Haven in February increased 22%. Transparency of information is important.

Mr. Felipe asked what would happen if the next Mayor was not as pro-educational as he was. Mayor DeStefano said that he did not think that there was a way to legislate that. However, the next Mayor would still be responsible for the education of New Haven's children. He said that the Charter Commission was making a statement that they had decided to take a risk to improve the education of Bridgeport's students. Nothing substitutes for the engagement of the adults, the parents, the administrators, and the staff. He advised that everyone to cut each other some slack and work with one another.

Mr. Estrada asked if the Board members were all residents of New Haven. Mayor DeStefano said that it was important to have the members as residents. He then stated for the record that that “the Commission should not do something ‘half assed’, but do it all the way”.

The Commission members thanked Mayor DeStefano for his input and his time.

Mayor DeStefano and Mayor Finch left the meeting at 6:20 p.m.

b. Paul Timpanelli, President and CEO, Bridgeport Regional Business Council

Mr. Paul Timpanelli, the president and CEO of the Bridgeport Regional Business Council (BRBC) then addressed Commission. Mr. Timpanelli said he had been involved in two other Charter Revision Commissions and he listed some of his various experiences, such as teacher, First Selectman/Mayor; elected BOE member; and business associate for the Commission. Mr. Timpanelli said that there were over 500 businesses that were represented by the BRBC that believe this was an important issue. He said that this was a crucial issue for the City. Mr. Timpanelli said that he had been involved in the transition teams for the last four Bridgeport mayors.

During the last 20 years, the mission of economic development has been succeeding so then the focus of the BRBC turned to the quality of the education. The BRBC then sponsored a study to develop a plan for the educational system originally expected to take two and a half years, but this study is now in year six. The study resulted in the BRBC recommending 13 million dollars in efficiencies.

One lesson that was learned was that the previous School Board was dysfunctional. When the former Board was offered 1 million dollars to help deal with the administration. However, the Board did not know how to handle this. He then gave an example of one of these issues.

Mr. Timpanelli said that he strongly supported mayoral commitment and accountability. In a minimal system with “the buck stops here” mentality, it is easier to hide. He gave an example of the disapproval rating for Congress but reminded everyone that 90% of the Congressmen will be reelected. For the President however, there is a greater likelihood that he may not be re-elected if there is dissatisfaction.

Crucial issues in Bridgeport include: a weak two party system; weak voter turn out, weak voter interest in local elections other than the Mayor, which is not that strong, either. Mr. Timpanelli said that it was his opinion that the Mayor should be given greater opportunities to be accountable, particularly in the area of the quality and performance of the school system.

Mr. Timpanelli stated that he was present to express the BRBC's support of Mayor Finch and would support it in November. If the system of appointing BOE members, then that will have an impact on how the adults performs.

Two critical challenges for the City are to improve schools and create more jobs. Residents in Bridgeport need to be able to

What is more important to city residents: the produce that comes out of the system or the ability to choose the BOE members? What is the better system? He suggested that the majority of the parents would have little interest in how the school board members were chosen, but a great deal of interest in the quality of the product. He then asked the Commissioners to consider whether there should be more accountability from the school board or less accountability. Once that decision is made, the question of whether there should be more mayoral control or less will be evident to the Commissioners.

Mr. Timpanelli then listed a number of issues that the School District is dealing with, such as one of the highest drop out rates, and having only 22% of the third graders reading at the State's target goal level. Having a reform agenda would help this and include items such as expanding school choice, increasing technology, insuring teacher quality and creating an atmosphere where private investors see an opportunity. This will only happen if the board is unified and has one agenda. The more accountability, the more likelihood that is to happen.

c. Maria Zambrano, Executive Director, EXCEL Bridgeport

Ms. Maria Zambrano, the director of Excel Bridgeport, came forward and said that she was a naive Bridgeport and graduated from Central Magnet. She said that in college, she had to struggled in a prestigious college. She said that in working with other Bridgeport graduates, one as recent as 2010, it was evident that Bridgeport was failing even its top students. As an educator in East Los Angeles, she became interested in the field of education and now has a Master's in Educational Policy.

She then gave a brief overview of her organization and its goal. All children can achieve high goals that will prepare them for college, for jobs and life. The work of Excel is framed by several factors. Bridgeport students are performing at least one or more grade levels below where they should be. In four years, there has been no progress in closing the achievement gap. Research has shown that if a child has not gotten on grade level by 3rd grade, they may never catch up. 75% of the 3rd grade level students are not reading on grade level. Bridgeport is the lowest performing District in the State. At Bassick, there was only one sophomore student was found to be on grade level.

The system needs to be changed. She said that she appreciated hearing the experts testify. Effective school board governance is critical and the recent progress of the current Board has

been encouraging. Bridgeport's experience with the State Appointed Board has modeled how the changes could be done for the City

Mayoral control will guarantee accountability. The person in charge will be held accountable for the successes and failures. The Board must be willing to take decisive action, swift and unified action. Reform that is stalled by dead lock is fatal.

Leadership is needed to manage the district's finances and the Superintendent. The current state appointed Board has attracted a national leader. The same kind of leadership is needed when Mr. Vallas' contract is up in December.

School board governance is only one of several factors that can together lead to student achievements. It is not a silver bullet. It is important to get this right. Mr. Vallas' work has been encouraging.

d. Alex Johnston, former Executive Director, ConnCann

Mr. Alex Johnston, the former executive of ConnCann, then greeted the Commissioners. He said that he wears a number of hats, such as parent, former head of ConnCann and as an appointed New Haven School Board member

One of the things that ConnCann did was to build a statewide improvement network. Mayoral control happened in Hartford when Mayor Perez appointed himself to the school board. But this requires a governance structure that could not support the direction of the Board. Without that type of support, a group could not find its way out of a crisis.

Mr. Johnston said that there were just under 15,000 school board and about 100,000 board members nationally. He then gave a brief review of the history of how the separation of the School Boards from the city administration occurred several years ago. The current process for electing board members has become a barrier for many cities. For some towns, the system works fine, but when there is only one sophomore in a high school that is performing on grade level, the system is not working.

He then addressed the idea that people would be disenfranchised if they can't elect Board members. ConnCann worked very hard in Hartford to simply encourage residents to vote on the Board. However, after this massive effort to encourage registered voters to vote for Board members, only 7% turned out for the election. He then said that the average students performing at grade level increased in Hartford by 11% and in New Haven, it increased 10%. Bridgeport has not moved forward in closing their achievement gap.

In New Haven, because the Board is not politicized, the Board talks about many different topics and doesn't talk about is unbelievable. Changing the charter allows everyone to have input.

Mr. Felipe thanked the three speakers for their testimonies. He also thanked Ms. Zambrano for returning to Bridgeport to help Bridgeport Students.

Mr. Felipe then asked Ms. Zambrano about the concern that there would be disenfranchisement of minority populations if mayoral control was approved. Ms. Zambrano then related the reasons why her parents became citizens, which was when they realized that their votes could have changed the outcome of the Board election. Education is a top priority every four years when the Mayor is elected. Mayor Bloomberg has faced much opposition in his City and there was no real way to hold the Board members accountable. Having mayoral control allows there to be more of a focus. She said that she believed it would increase minority participation.

Mr. Felipe asked Mr. Timpanelli about larger employers thinking of moving into City, and whether these companies might consider the school performance. Mr. Timpanelli said that it strongly affects the attraction because the businesses look at stability of the City and the schools. He also noted that his group has been trying to raise the final funds for the final phase of the six year plan and the instability of the school board has had a negative impact on the fund raising efforts. This also impacts attracting businesses to Bridgeport.

Mr. Felipe asked Mr. Johnston about his experiences of working with two nationally recognized superintendents, and whether Bridgeport would have been able to attract that level of Superintendent to the District. Mr. Johnston said that he did not believe that Bridgeport would have been able to do that because people will not come if the system is unstable.

Mr. Felipe pointed out that the independent school boards were originally created to remove the schools from the mayoral changes. Mr. Johnston replied that the Mayor would still be accountable.

Ms. Carter thanked everyone for their comments. She said that she was happy to be part of the process, particularly since there was only one student at Bassick that was on grade level.

She then asked about fragmentation. The response was that fragmentation is hard and there is no guarantee of success.

Ms. Simpson thanked the speakers, and said that there were numerous other speakers who had testified. She then asked Mr. Timpanelli about some testimony by Ms. Hilliard that had been previously given. She gave the impression that she was speaking for the BPEF group. Mr. Timpanelli said that he was not able to attend the last meeting. Mr. Felipe noted that he had received several phone calls from Board members saying they were not in favor of the views stated in the letter.

Mr. Weichsel said that Mr. Timpanelli's presentation was excellent. He said that the disarray in the City was on target and that the effect of the disarray did impact businesses that might be considering Bridgeport. Mr. Timpanelli said that Mayor DeStefano said it clearly that the Board

had a chance to change things. He said that people were hesitating to move to Bridgeport or actively leaving Bridgeport because of the school system.

Mr. Estrada said that he was almost speechless when the University of Bridgeport lost an employee this year because his children were now at school age and the staff member couldn't get the child into a charter school. This same pattern has happened over and over again for years. Mr. Timpanelli said that currently in the City, there are a number of new housing developments and these are young couples. It is important to keep them here, the City needs to improve the school system. Mr. Johnston said that parental involvement is necessary. He then gave an example of parents pressing for more transparency in the lottery system for pre-school. The idea that parents would not be involved is different for New Haven.

Mr. Valentino then thanked everyone for their input. He then asked what the impact on students would be if the city changed from 100% elected to 100% appointed. Ms. Zambrano said that 10 months ago, there was incredible frustration with the schools. Having the mayor accountable would make the residents feel they had united behind an elected official that would focus on the best interest of the students. Having an appointed board minimizes the politics.

Mr. Valentino asked Mr. Timpanelli about how the people felt about those elected members of the Council that were also employees. Mr. Timpanelli said that he felt that most people had difficulty with this concept, but added that it might not be correctable.

Mr. Valentino asked Mr. Johnston about the changes in the Board when he came on. Mr. Johnston said that when ConnCann was first operating that there were State officials who believe that the achievement gap was an illusion. As more documentation was compiled, Mr. Johnston was in conflict with Mayor DeStefano on this. Mr. Johnston explained that when he went on the Board, he stated that he would continue to do what was best for not only New Haven but all the students in the State. He said that he continued to be an advocate for all those students. It's not about what the tally is when a vote is taken, but how the issues are handled.

Mr. Valentino said that there had been four new schools opened and five schools closed in Bridgeport during the past few years. Mr. Johnston said that it was important to separate the idea of a "school" from a building. Hartford has numerous high school buildings, but each building may have many high schools in the same building. He said that it was important for students to have relationships with many different adults.

Rev. Marshall thanked everyone for their input. He then asked Mr. Timpanelli about the scope of the last four administrations and the Charter Revision experience and whether this issue had come up before. Mr. Timpanelli said that it had not. Rev. Marshall then asked Mr. Timpanelli what he thought should be the focus in order to protect the Bridgeport students. Mr. Timpanelli said that the question was to create a system where there was accountability. By having someone in charge that would assure the accountability.

Rev. Marshall asked Mr. Johnston about the reform on State Policy. Mr. Johnston said that ConnCann's focus was on the State level because people skip over the state and think only about local or federal government. However almost 90% of the resources are from the State, not to mention the amount of State regulations. Governor Malloy has put forward this year as the Year of Educational Reform.

Regarding governance, the State has significant powers to intervene in local districts. It is the State's responsibility to provide an education to all the residents of the State, but they have delegated this to the individual towns. He said that regarding the recent Supreme Court ruling about training was a technical issue. Rather than treating all the districts the same, why not focus on the districts that are struggling. The State needs to have a partnership with the local school boards to get the system right. The State cannot succeed in this if Bridgeport fails.

Rev. Marshall said that excellence in any human endeavor is the sum of many difficult conversations. People don't hold people accountable. The structure that is currently in place is not doing what it needs to do.

Mr. Weichsel stated that when he arrived in the United States, his parents went to night school in order to become Americans. He then said that he would like to see a night school system re-established. Mr. Timpanelli said that while it wasn't something that would normally be in a charter, it was something that would be within the power of the Board and that should be accountable. Discussion followed on that suggestion.

Mr. Felipe said that he began as a community organizer and frequently the idea that there was an idea that the people on the other side of the table were awful and hated children. But at the end of the day, most people wanted to get to the same goal.

Mr. Felipe then thanked everyone who came and gave input. He said that there was also a lack of commitment by those who did not come and give input. Ms. Simpson thanked the presenters again.

UP-DATE AND PRESENTATION BY COUNSEL

Mr. Felipe said that the next meeting would be at the Council Chambers on March 20th. Atty. Mednick said that he was working on setting up the meeting about the library board. He said that initial discussion on the education would be Thursday and that the Charter conversion document should be in the Council Members' hands on Thursday. Ms. Simpson thanked Atty. Mednick for all the work in scheduling the speakers.

ADJOURNMENT

**** MR. VALENTINO MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** MS. CARTER SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services